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U.S. Reviewing Options, Bolsters Offshore Force

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A second U.S. aircraft carrier reached the eastern Mediterranean yesterday, and Navy fighter jets flew reconnaissance missions over Beirut as the Reagan administration conducted "an intense review" of policy options in the Middle East, officials said.

The U.S. military maneuvers and mounting tension in Lebanon fueled speculation about possible U.S. military action against Syrian or Moslem militia positions that U.S. officials said may be threatening American troops.

While some Pentagon officials sought to dampen that speculation, several other administration sources said they would not rule out anything.

President Reagan is scheduled to leave today for a seven-day visit to Japan and South Korea, and several administration sources said they are

not anxious to take action that would divert attention from the trip. But one knowledgeable official said Reagan's schedule will not affect U.S. policy in Lebanon.

"I think what has to be done would be done," the official said. "The president, if you've followed his decision-making closely, has done the right thing wherever he is, so I wouldn't put too much importance on the trip."

Whether U.S. officials were raising the possibility of military action because something is planned or simply to warn Syria could not be learned. Syria, apparently taking the signals seriously, yesterday announced mobilization of its army and reserves.

U.S. officials have threatened retaliation if they determine responsibility for the suicide bombing attack that killed at least 230 U.S. Marines and other servicemen at the Marine headquarters compound in Beirut Oct. 23.

Gen. John W. Vessey Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Sunday that no culprit has been identified, but other officials have cited Syria and Iranian-backed groups operating in Lebanon:

Several officials have said they favor military action to show Syria that it cannot dominate a Lebanon fractured by ethnic and sectional strife. But Pentagon officials have said it would be difficult to retaliate

in Lebanon without further endangering U.S. forces, and State Department officials have expressed doubt about the diplomatic implications of any such military move.

An administration official said Syria has kept a low profile since the car-bomb attack against an Israeli installation in southern Lebanon last Friday and appears genuinely concerned about possible U.S. military intervention.

Pentagon officials said carrier-based F14 fighters equipped with cameras instead of bombs flew reconnaissance missions over Beirut yesterday morning. They would not comment on whether the jets were routinely updating U.S. intelligence or marking targets for a special mission.

The carrier USS Kennedy arrived near Lebanon with five accompanying ships, joining the carrier USS Eisenhower and about 10 ships off the coast. The battleship USS New Jersey, which left Alexandria, Egypt, a day earlier than scheduled, also was on the scene.

"It certainly is not unusual for us to have two carriers in the Mediterranean," one official said.

A third carrier, the USS Independence, is expected to reach the Mediterranean later this week. The Kennedy is expected to proceed eventually through the Suez Canal into the Indian Ocean, while the Independence is scheduled to replace the Eisenhower for several months off Lebanon.